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. . . to Be Political Activists Off the Job?

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By FRED L. ZIMMERMAN

Rarely has the press been more widely distrusted or attacked than now. Blacks and student radicals agree with Vice President Agnew that the press cannot be believed. Millions of Americans, whatever their politics, apparently concur.

This anti-press attitude--regardless of its genesis or justification--should deeply disturb anyone who believes our society cannot function properly unless its citizens have access to a free flow of *rcliable* information about what is happening around them.

Thus, it is regrettable that a growing number of newspaper reporters, mainly the bright young people who have entered journalism in the late 1960s, are succumbing to the temptation to plunge themselves publicly into the most bitter social and political controversies of the day.

Until recently there has been nearly total agreement among journalists that a reporter's job is to report the news and to avoid making news himself. But now, in what looks much like the newspaper profession's version of the generation gap, reporters and editors argue among themselves about whether it is proper for newsmen to participate in protest marches, work for political candidates, wear black arm bands to press conferences, and buy newspaper ads with headlines like, "Post Reporters Against the War."

Perhaps the strongest argument against this sort of activity is the fact that it reduces the credibility of the press. (That, in turn, presumably enhances the credibility of one of the press' natural enemies, incumbent politicians.)

This may not be worth worrying about if one is writing for an audience of true believers, such as the readers of various opinion journals. Maybe it would not bother the New Republic's readers, for example, if the magazine's White House correspondent were to march in anti-war demonstrations. And it might not upset the National Review's readers if that publication's staff were soliciting campaign contributions for conservative candidates.

But it's a different matter with a publication read by people of divergent ideologies who are seeking dispassionate reporting rather than a selection of facts to document a certain political viewpoint. Daily newspapers and wire services are expected to present unbiased material that is written with intellectual honesty by reporters whose aim is to give the news as accurately as possible.

Few readers probably are aware that a good reporter can, and usually does, submerge his personal feelings when he writes a news article. They can hardly be asked to trust his accuracy, therefore, if they know of his personal participation on one side or the other of the issues he--or his paper--covers.

Some journalistic advocates of activism reply that a publication's credibility is more seriously damaged by its editorial views than by occasional public awareness of a reporter's politicalization.

That well may be true, and it suggests that editorials are more trouble for a newspaper than they are worth. It seems doubtful that they are as useful or as influential as they were in the early days of American journalism, before television, news magazines and the "interpretive" news story. Yet any reporter who has ever sought to interview a man whose views have been attacked by the paper's editorialists knows that many readers assume the paper's news columns reflect its editorials.

A paper's credibility also suffers, of course, if its publisher takes free baseball tickets and dinners from public relations men, or is known as a big wheel at the Chamber of Commerce or an active participant in local or national politics. There is no sound reason why a paper's bosses should not live by the same rules they would like their reporters to follow.

The thorniest question posed by the activism issue is the one that asks why reporters, being free citizens, should not have the same latitude as others to work for candidates, wear peace buttons, contribute to causes, march in protests and sign petitions.

An obvious response is that newsmen are not ordinary citizens. Although all Americans derive benefits from a Constiiutionally guaranteed free press, only a small segment of society actually has direct access to the presses.

The reporter's privilege to be widely read in a publication free of government interference, a right not enjoyed by other citizens, implies special obligations to his readers. One of those obligations is to refrain from overt political activity.

Max Frankel, who heads the Washington Bureau of the New York Times has an additional answer. Reporters, he says, are one of several classes of citizens who should "serve an ideal of professionalism that is rated more highly than personal conviction." Mr. Frankel observes that some attorneys defend disreputable clients, and that some policemen protect lives and property of those whose views may be distasteful to the cops. Similar analogies can be found in the roles of ministers and physicians.

"Fair judgment is our business," says Mr. Frankel, "and it should claim a higher loyalty than any other business or cause or ideal."

What course is available, then, for the reporter who decides, quite plausibly, that the burning issues of the day are so grave that he can no longer stand dispassionately aside and merely report the news?

First, he should quit his job. Not only will that be an honest gesture toward his readers but it will be consistent with the degree of his concern. Driven by conscience to take strong personal action to make the world better, he then should run for office, or sign on as a politican's speechwriter, or seek employment with the Congress of Racial Equality, the John Birch Society or a cause-oriented journal like the Nation or Human Events.

Such temptations are alluring, particularly to young people in times like these of great social stress. But especially during such times is there a geniune social value in dispassionate, informed and reliable reportage. The essence of the democratic ideal is that the public can be trusted to make the right decisions if it knows the facts. Above the clash of violent opinions, therefore, they also serve who only report the news.